

## PROPHECIES IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY

Matthew 1 and 2

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Prayer: Our Father, we thank You for this season of the year which reminds us that our Lord is not only the Lord of Glory but He is the Lord who became flesh and dwelt among us without sin that we might realize that we have someone who understands all about us and loves us just the same. As we turn to the Word of God, we pray that You will go before, quicken each of our minds, may these lips speak the truth carefully, and help us to evaluate what You have written in Your precious Word, for we ask it in the Saviour's name. Amen.

Matthew records his Christmas story in chapters one and two of his Gospel. In those chapters he quotes five prophecies relating to our so-called Christmas season, the nativity story. I want to look at those briefly with you this morning. We will not be able to explore at great length any one of them. However, since this is a class, you may ask questions and perhaps I can clarify anything that is not clear.

### Five of Matthew's prophecies in the Christmas Story.

1. Matthew 1:21: "And she [that is, Mary] shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord to the prophet [that is, to Isaiah] saying, [and here is the prophecy] 'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel', which being interpreted is, God with us."

Let me tell you about Isaiah chapter 7. Isaiah is told by the Lord to go and meet King Ahaz by the upper pool and to take with him his son. And so Isaiah does that. And the message of Isaiah to Ahaz is, "We are in danger of being invaded by enemy forces. But, if you will trust in the Lord, He will deliver you." Ahaz is very stubborn and says, "I'm not going to trust." Isaiah says, "Ask a sign," and Ahaz says, "I'm not going to tempt the Lord." So Isaiah says, "Therefore, the Lord Himself shall give you a sign. Behold, [and then comes this prophecy] the virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son and they shall call his name Emmanuel." A prophecy of the virgin birth of our Lord.

We could spend the whole time on that particular prophecy and the problems that surround it. You know very well that the liberals do not believe in a virgin birth. Blasphemously, "Jesus is the result of the union of Joseph and Mary," or, more blasphemously, "He is the result of Mary and her physical relationships with a Roman soldier who was stationed in that area." They go to great length to deny such a thing as the virgin birth. I'm sure I'm not speaking to people this morning who believe that sort of teaching.

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An extended study of that passage would indicate that Isaiah uses a Hebrew word, "almah." In every case that it is used in the Old Testament it is used of a pure virgin. There is another word, "bethulah," which speaks of a young woman of marriagable age, but in Joel it is also used of a married woman, and that is not the word that Isaiah uses. So, in this connection, I believe we can substantiate what you already believe, that is, when Mary brought forth her firstborn son He was virgin born.

It was a strong enough argument in Matthew chapter 1 to convince Joseph, who knew that Mary was with child and he was not the father. He had wanted to put her away. But the Lord appeared to him and said, "Now wait a minute, Joseph, do not be afraid to take unto thee Mary, thy wife, for that which is in her is conceived of the Holy Spirit." And Joseph believed the truth of the virgin birth. If he did, surely we ought to as well.

2. The second prophecy Matthew uses is in chapter 2, verse 6, beginning to read in verse 1: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem saying, 'Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship him.' When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where the Christ [or the Messiah] should be born. And they said unto him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is writtten by the prophet, [now a quotation from Micah 5:2] 'For thou Bethlehem in the land of Judah art not the least among the princes of Judah, for out of thee shall come a governor that shall rule my people Israel'".

When Christ was born in Bethlehem, it was in fulfillment of a prophecy that had been made seven hundred years before. Micah was prophesying concerning a Babylonian captivity for his people. That was amazing in itself because Babylon was not a power in the world at that time, but they did go into captivity later. But he goes on to encourage his people in chapter 5, verse 2, to say, "Nevertheless, in Bethlehem the Messiah will be born." Isn't it interesting that none of the chief priests or scribes went down to check that out? You would think they would have done that, but they didn't. So the wise men went down themselves to find there the young child.

The prophecy was given seven hundred years ahead of time. Suppose when Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492, which would be 500 years ago, that when he got off the ship, if he did, on the coast of the United States, he started to walk across the land with a flag in his hand, and someone said, "Where are you going?" He said, "You just follow me." So he went across Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, and finally came to Ohio, a little place about fifty miles just inside the border, which wasn't then a place as you know. And suppose he put his flag down there in the middle of the country. Someone would say, "Why did you do that?" "Well," he would say, "I want to tell

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you, about five hundred years from now there will be a little fellow born right here by the name of Willis Bishop." You would say, "How impossible!" And indeed it was! But it wasn't so when Micah, touched by the Spirit of God, said that Messiah when He comes seven hundred years from now will be born in Bethlehem Ephratah. And though Joseph and Mary were living in Nazareth, eighty or ninety miles away, they slowly made their way over a five-day journey to reach Bethlehem, and there our Saviour was born. And so, I think that Matthew, with real joy, recorded this particular prophecy of Bethlehem-Ephratah.

3. The third prophecy that Matthew chooses to record is in chapter 2, verse 15, starting at verse 13: "And when they were departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream saying, 'Arise, take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word, for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.' When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night and departed into Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet saying, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son.'"

There are some problems with that prophecy that we won't take time to look at this morning. Matthew is quoting Hosea 11:1, where Hosea very clearly says, "Out of Egypt will I call my son." We haven't many details concerning that, but I ran across a little article by Paul Maier that I will read to you:

Wherever the Bible is silent, legend is highly vocal. And so the apocryphal Arabic Gospel of the Infancy tries to fill in the details of the Flight to Egypt. One of its delightful stories tells how Joseph and Mary were waylaid by robbers on the Sinai road, but they found nothing to steal from the poor couple. Taking pity on them instead, the bandits gave them provisions and sent them on their way. One of these likeable brigands, of course, would cross Jesus' path thirty years later at the Crucifixion. Who but the penitent thief on his right?"

That is just a legend of course, and in all likelihood is not correct. That was on their way to Egypt. Matthew says "when they came out of Egypt" into Palestine again -- then was this prophecy fulfilled, "out of Egypt have I called my son."

4. The fourth prophecy is found in Matthew 2:18, backing up to 16: "Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceedingly angry, and sent and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem and all its borders from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet saying, 'In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great

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mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and would not be comforted, because they are not."

Verse 18 is a quotation from Jeremiah 31:15: "In Rama there was a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping." One of the problems with this is -- go back now in your memory to the burial of Rachel, who died on the way to Bethlehem.

Those of you who have visited Bethlehem know that as the road comes out of Jerusalem you come to a fork in the road. To the right you go on down into the Negev. To the left you can throw a stone into the city of Bethlehem. There Rachel was buried. There is a dome and a cenotaph which is the legendary place of Rachel's burial. The problem is that Rama is not there in Bethlehem, but it is about five miles north of Jerusalem. So how could it be said when they were weeping for the children that the weeping was heard in Rama?

It could be, of course, that the weeping was everywhere, and that even five miles north of Jerusalem the weeping was heard. But more likely our problem is a problem of translation. The word "Rama" means "height." In translating, would you translate it as a place, or would you translate it "height"? There are a number of Ramas in Palestine. Some of the Jewish rabbis translated Jeremiah 31:15, "There will be weeping on the height." Luther, in his translation of the Bible, translates both Jeremiah 31:15 and Matthew 2:18 as "on the height there will be lamentation and weeping, Rachel weeping for her children." And I like that. Let me tell you why.

One of the privileges I had on my first trip into Israel was to work on an archaeological dig for a half day, at a place called Ramat Rahel (the height of Rachel). When Israel formed the nation they put a kibbutz settlement there, up on a very nice hill. From that hill you could see right down to where Rachel is buried and into the city of Bethlehem. When I was working on that archaeological dig in which they were excavating some large buildings, which it is believed one of the kings of Judah had built and Jeremiah had said, "You shouldn't be doing that, you should be doing some other things," I realized that I was quite near to Bethlehem, but part of the problem was that at that time the line between Jordan and Israel was along the edge of that hill. So I couldn't go to Bethlehem from there. But I asked permission to go around to the kibbutz settlement, which was deserted. It was on the borderline and the buildings were full of holes from the shooting, and not too long before that a man had been killed by some Jordanian fire in that area.

I took a circuitous route around the base of the hill in which we were digging and came to the kibbutz settlement, which was formed into a square "U", and in the courtyard there was a life-size statue of Rachel with some children hiding in her skirt. As I looked around, wishing I could get down into Bethlehem, all of a sudden I heard a sharp voice, and I turned to see a soldier with a gun. I said, "Wait a minute." But he couldn't speak English and I couldn't

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speak Hebrew. Fortunately, he was an Israeli soldier on duty there to guard what remained of the settlement. Eventually I made him understand I was a friend so he allowed me to remain. I remember looking down from the height of Rachel to where the weeping had taken place for the children of Bethlehem. And so Jeremiah and Matthew were right. Weeping was heard on the height for the children that were slain, as Matthew records the quote from Jeremiah.

5. There is one more passage, and this one is a little different. Again chapter 2 of Matthew, beginning at verse 19: "But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt saying, 'Arise and take the young child and his mother and go into the land of Israel, for they are dead who sought the young child's life.' And he arose and took the young child and his mother and came into the land of Israel. And when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judea in the place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'."

Matthew's fifth quotation from prophecy: "He came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene'."

Folks have, I guess I can say this, torn their hair out trying to find that prophecy in the Old Testament. And I will turn to the one they say it refers to, but it doesn't.

Turn with me to Isaiah 11:1: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." They say that is the prophecy Matthew is quoting from because of that word "Branch". In the Hebrew it is spelled "NTZR." But that is not a Hebrew root for the term "Nazareth." I think that is a foolish attempt to square Isaiah 11:1 with the prophecy that Matthew quotes. What then is the answer?

Let me point out in Matthew 2:23 that it was a prophecy that was spoken by the prophets (plural), not by one prophet but by several prophets. Some written scripture has never been spoken. For instance, the book of Jude. Jude says in verse 3, "I wanted to write to you concerning the common salvation, but constraint was upon me and I have written to you that you should contend for the faith." It was written, but Jude did not deliver that as a spoken message. Some scripture was both spoken and written -- the Sermon on the Mount, for example. Our Lord spoke that to the multitudes and also Matthew wrote it. Some scripture was only written. Some scripture was spoken and written. My next statement is what? Some scripture was spoken prophecy and never written. So some prophecies were spoken and never written.

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Something of a comparable principle is in Acts 20:35: "I have shown you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to help the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" "It is more blessed to give than to receive" is not found in the Gospel records. The first time it is recorded is in Acts 20 and verse 35.

The principle -- going back to Matthew 2:23: "spoken by the prophets, 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'" Who spoke that? A number of prophets in the Old Testament time prophesied that he would be called a Nazarene, but it was never written down until Matthew wrote it in Matthew 2 verse 23. Spoken by the prophets (plural). So Joseph and Mary and the young child made their way to Nazareth where He would grow up and later minister on our behalf.

Comment: Isn't it amazing that in Isaiah 11:1 the "Branch" is with a capital letter?

A. I'll tell you why that is. In Hebrew all of the letters are capitals. So that is a capitalization that the translators have put there. The reason they did that is because Christ is the Branch -- Jeremiah indicates that. Even the Jewish rabbis in reading Isaiah 11:1 said that the "Branch" referred to the Messiah. So it is a proper capitalization.

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